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ABSTRACT

Oral history is but one of several methods of examining history, yet it holds powerful implications as a tool of instruction within the bilingual classroom. The most compelling rationale for integrating oral history techniques into bilingual social studies is that generally oral history has remained virtually isolated from most bilingual elementary classrooms. It is an exciting teaching strategy which can develop a variety of skills and competencies in learners and is a refreshing approach not only to bilingual social studies, but also to language arts and other subject areas. Socialization is enhanced as students and teachers work jointly and as students go out into their various communities and become involved in the interview process. Interaction with interviewees and consequent listening, editing, and transcription expose students to different terminology, dialects, etc. After bilingual teachers become familiar with oral history techniques, they can conduct interviews with local citizens and take two or three students along so that all are involved in the learning process. Students can interview different family members and gear their interviews toward various themes such as immigration, religious attitudes, musicology, etc. Oral history projects should conclude with a planned finale--a little publication of excerpts, an exhibit, or an honoring of narrators. (BRR)

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INTEGRATING ORAL HISTORY INTO THE BILINGUAL SOCIAL STUDIES: AN INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNIQUE THAT IS SUCCESSFUL

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George Mehaffy and Thad Sitton wrote that "as a general scholarly phenomenon, oral history is expanding the limits of our historical knowledge, particularly in the realm of social history" (Mehaffy and Sitton, 1977, p. 378). As a form of anecdotage, it has been in existence as long as history itself. However, as a viable and frequently utilized instructional strategy, oral history methodology is relatively new and often not clearly understood.

Oral history in its most basic form, is simply one of the methods of collecting and recording live people's recollections of things past. A review of the literature indicates that these contemplations of the past are in most cases collected for historical purposes.

For the bilingual educator, whether an elementary, middle school or high school teacher, care has to be taken not to mislabel oral history as a subject or to confuse this method with subjects such as family, local, and economic histories. It is important to understand, however, that these subjects do go well with the method. The major premise remains that oral history is but one of several methods of examining history yet the powerful implications it holds as a tool of instruction within the bilingual classroom are indeed noteworthy. It is an exciting teaching strategy which can develop a variety of skills and competencies in learners and a refreshing approach to not only the bilingual social studies but language

arts and other subject areas.

Oral history is collected through interviews which are tape-recorded. The basic equipment needed is a cassette recorder and tapes which require a minimum investment or none at all since most schools and many students have access to this equipment. Teachers must be aware that the interviews consist of planned-in-advance questions and are not merely recordings of random conversation (Baum, 1975).

A listing of current oral history projects throughout the United States is indeed a substantial one. Following are descriptions of several of those projects and the geographic areas in which they have taken place:

1. In Espanola, New Mexico, Mr. Edward Atencio has been collecting folklore for almost twenty years. Every year his junior high school classes undertake a different project using oral history techniques to enhance the project. This year the class is studying folk medicine and its cultural implications in various northern New Mexican communities. Not only do interviews take place with family or community members, but actual medicinal herbs are collected, labeled, classified, and displayed.

2. In El Paso, Texas, Dr. Oscar Martinez has long been involved in collecting oral history by interviewing residents of El Paso and Cuidad Juarez, Mexico. The material collected will be published in a book which will examine the border history of this unique geographic area.

3. Nancy Whistler, Project Director for the Colorado Center for Oral History has compiled a listing and description of over 110 projects in Colorado. Tapes of each individual interview can be found in the Denver Public Library and provide a rich and colorful insight into Colorado history.

4. The most successful and widely recognized of all oral history projects remains the Foxfire Program at Rabun Gap, Georgia. The Foxfire projects have been published and widely disseminated. Moreover, they have been instrumental in lending credence to the notion that oral history can be successful at the junior high and high school level.

Oral History and the Bilingual Social Studies: A Rationale

The much written about curriculum reform projects of the 1950's

were notable in that they placed much emphasis on "understanding the structure of the disciplines - basic organizing concepts and their relations to each other" (Kniker and Naylor, 1981, p. 268). One result of the projects has been a more concise definition and pragmatic orientation toward the teaching modes of inquiry, discovery and inductive teaching. Not only the "new social studies" but the "new science, new math, and new language arts" have emphasized the mastery of process or involving students in learning.

As Bruner (1960) related in discussing these instructional techniques, the goal was to have studerts experience the process of doing rather than merely memorize facts about the subject. In view of the fact that oral history actively involves students in various learning situations the concept of process is reinforced through this methodology.

Another advantage of actively involving students in learning has its bases in socialization. Through oral history students and teachers work jointly but most important, students begin developing social skills. These skills are acquired and developed as the students go out into their various communities and become involved in the interview process while learning to go and ask people for information.

While on the theme of skill development, mention should be made of other skills acquired through oral history. One such skill is listening. "In taping their interviews the students begin to relate themselves to the subject that they are studying, they begin to learn how to listen to people, and so on" (Baum, 1975, p. 2).

Other skills acquired are rooted in language and language acquisition. By interracting with interviewees and consequently listening, editing, and transcribing the results, the student is exposed to different terminology, dialects, etc. This is an excellent way of expanding a learner's basic stock of vocabulary. Furthermore, the same excitement generated as a result of discovering historical information through oral history techniques would hopefully carry over to language and language learning. In this regard, students would search out meanings and understandings to the terminology, phrases, and dialects they've been exposed to.

The most compelling rationale for integrating oral history techniques into the bilingual social studies centers on the fact that as a general rule, oral history has remained virtually isolated from most bilingual elementary classrooms. The noted author James Banks advocates an Interdisciplinary - Conceptual Approach to the study of social science related concepts by "examining the expressions of ethnic cultures in literature, music, drama, dance,

art, communications and foods" (Banks, 1979, p. 32). Once again, the use of oral history methodology surfaces as an alternative approach to examining the broad realm of social sciences from a first hand perspective.

Because so much of this country is composed of multi-ethnic populations, oral history can be utilized effectively to teach all students that all cultures are important yet focusing on significant aspects or contributions. Eliot Wigginton has successfully undertaken this very notion in his book I WISH I COULD GIVE MY SON A WILD RACCOON (1976). The book contains interviews with forty different individuals from different ethnic groups and from different states throughout the U.S. The underlying theme focuses on the concept that all people are unique, all are different, and all are important and vital.

> Despite the culture, despite the personality behind the voice, despite the diverse problems that surround us and compete for our energy, and despite the sometimes awful experiences the speakers have had - and in some cases are still going through - there are definite common threads that unite us into a universal human family (Wigginton, 1976, p. 14).

All of the skills mentioned could be cited as advantages for employing oral history as a teaching tool. The major advantage

that the research indicates is that the results of such programs are tangible. No longer do history, geography and economics have to be boring. "Perhaps the most telling argument for the development of classroom oral history projects are, in effect, real. They actually do something" (Mehaffy and Sitton, 1977, p. 380). From these projects the students realize that their work has not been in vain. The results are there in the form of the knowledge acquired, in the process utilized to acquire the knowledge, or in a recorded document that can be used at any time for various reasons or purposes.

Oral History Activities

A fundamental principle of curriculum development calls for the cooperative and reflective identification of student's educational needs. Similarly, the selection of oral history activities must involve cooperation between students and teacher and should in part, be based on felt or expressed needs of students. This paper will outline only a few suggested activities or projects, however, it should be remembered that this area is a vast one. Most importantly, the relevance of activities selected will be more appropriate when correlated to students' everyday lives.

The initial activities should start out as small projects in an effort for the learners to achieve some measure of success and also to allow them to develop a feel for the oral history process.

Selection of appropriate activities allows teacher and students to be creative as they move from small projects to more complex ones "that cross disciplinary lines and deeply involve large segments of the school in research within the local community" (Mehaffy and Sitton, 1977, p. 380).

The following suggestions are modified versions of ideas presented schematically by Mehaffy and Sitton (1977). When appropriate, specific reference to bilingual and/or multicultural topics or concepts are presented.

1. The teacher must become familiar with oral history techniques. This can be accomplished in part by reading such materials as; HARD TIMES (book and record, 1970) by Studs Terkel, FOXFIRE (previously mentioned, 1972 and 1973), TEACHING LOCAL HISTORY: TRENDS, TIPS, AND RESOURCES (1977) by Fay Metcalf and Matthew Downey, and other references by oral historians. Upon reading some of this background material, the teacher should obtain a cassette recorder and proceed through a self-training in the techniques or strategies of oral history. The end result of this self-training would culminate in the teacher proceeding through the entire process of interviewing, transcribing

and editing. A good reference to use during the self-training process is Willa K. Baum's, ORAL HISTORY FOR THE LOCAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY (1975).

2. The bilingual teacher can begin conducting interviews with local citizens within their respective community and take two or three students along so that all members are involved in the learning process. The teacher and students could in turn help teach the remaining class members oral history techniques and strategies using a peer teaching approach.

3. As a part of individualizing instruction, the bilingual teachers can develop specific learning centers designed to provide learners with an opportunity to practice and refine interviewing skills.

4. The students can interview different family members and gear their interviews toward various themes such as; immigration, religious attitudes, geneology type projects, musicology, and others. A major objective of this activity can be to stress the importance of certain values, for

example, the concept of the family. Meanwhile, students would also be establishing historical events.

5. A most interesting type of activity could evolve around interviewing community members with the intention of collecting folklore. The bilingual teacher can take this instructional activity a step further by coupling the interviewing activity with a trip to a home for the aged. Bilingual communities are rich in folklore and this form of cultural journalism abounds in most communities regardless of size. This folklore could then be transcribed, edited, and published in newspaper or book form. In Canutillo, Texas, a class project in an elementary school composed primarily of bilingual students collected "cuentos" (short stories), "adivinanzas" (riddles), and "dichos" (proverbs) and published them in a newsletter type of publication.

6. The students could develop oral history projects that would be part of a total social history of the community. This community history project would be larger in scope than the other activities

listed. It would encompass such areas as education, economics, family histories, social problems, religion and even entertainment. This is the type of activity which could involve other classes such as journalism classes, typing classes, geography classes and art classes (photography). Different segments of this project could be assigned to different students with the final result being a comprehensive overview of that particular community.

The possibilities that such a project holds are enormous and the interest and enthusiasm generated by such an endeavor would be overwhelming. As a consequence, many students would be involved in the mastery of process. As previously mentioned, the possibilities and varieties of projects and activities that exist and have yet to be developed are certainly abundant.

The question has been raised concerning what to do with this mass of historical information. Willa K. Baum provides an excellent response by suggesting that "there should always be some sort of planned finale - a little publication of excerpts, an exhibit or multi-media presentation for the local historical society, a party with the narrators as guests" (1975, p. 3).

The key lies in the word "doing". Oral history is an action method. It constantly involves interraction, thinking, doing, inquiring, organizing, synthesizing, and analyzing. At a time when bilingual multicultural education teachers are seeking instructional strategies and methods which involve learners actively in the process of research yet have a substantial degree of correlation to children's everyday lives and experiences, oral history stands out as one strategy that works.

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